

ENTERTAINMENT

Birth Centenary Tribute: How Satyajit Ray's women protagonists became 'contemporary' to men, not 'equals'

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They were strong women who didn't hesitate to break barriers. Their lives were filled with struggle but they were hardly shown as damsels in a perpetual state of distress. They were the protagonists in the movies of Satyajit Ray, the filmmaker par excellence whose stories haunt you long after you are done watching them.



Ray stands out for numerous reasons. He introduced a rare realism in films that did not exist before, and his characters, often drawn from literature, were palpably real. But apart from these, Ray's films stand out for their powerful female characters. Inspired by the turbulence and movement of the society he was posited in, Ray never reduced his female characters to an 'extra' in his films. More often than not, they come across as real human beings, burdened with their share of struggles, and emboldened by their desire to survive.

The typified roles that existed for women in Indian films during that time were either a 'body of display' or the 'eye candy,' but Ray broke this tradition. Refraining from making a blunt statement through his films, he used his female characters, often as victims or as survivors, to shed light on the perils of society.

Sarbajaya and Durga in Pather Panchali



Released in 1955, Pather Panchali was Ray's directorial debut. Based on Bibhutibushan Bandopadhyay's novel of the same name, the film traces the childhood of the protagonist, Apu, and his elder sister Durga, and brings to the fore the harsh reality of poverty. Though in the film, much like the novel, it is Apu who is touted as the protagonist, Ray invests equally in the characters of Durga and Sarbajaya, Apu's mother. In the narrative that revolves around her brother, Durga holds his hand firmly

and helps him brave several obstacles. She is caring, dutiful, and protective towards her brother, but her character never threatens to be overshadowed by him. In the three-part film series, the throbbing absence of Durga's character qualifies as her presence.

Sarbajaya, though seemingly ordinary, is an extremely powerful character. Left alone to take care of her son, after her husband and daughter die, Sarbajaya is grief-stricken but stays resolute and dignified. She may be vulnerable but she hides it well and does not hinder Apu's dreams. In the second film of the trilogy, *Aparajito*, Sarbajaya dies a lonely death, as her son arrives only too late from the city to visit his ailing mother.

Dayamoyee in Devi



Based on a short story by Provatkumar Mukhopadhyay, the film is based in 19th century rural Bengal where a 17-year-old Dayamoyee is hailed as a goddess by her superstitious father-in-law. The film dealt with the Hindu patriarchal ritualistic traditions, and their effect on ordinary women. It shed light on the untold victimization of women that came at the cost of reverence.

The garlands that decorate Dayamoyee are indeed the shackles of whims and blind faith of a patriarchal society. And the young Dayamoyee's terrifying belief in it, calls for the ultimate doom.

Charu in Charulata



Released in 1964, *Charulata* is based on Rabindranath Tagore's novella, *Nastanirh* (The Broken Nest). It chronicles the story of a lonely housewife, who lives a life of luxury but is ignored by her workaholic husband. Charu was the archetype of several women in Bengal who seemed happy but were struggling with society-imposed loneliness. Ray brought this less-discussed loneliness, and the desires of such women, to the fore. Her dissatisfaction, and the crevices in her marriage, meet the audience's eyes with the arrival of Amal, her husband's cousin. He awakens latent desires in Charu, and Ray infuses a rare human-like greyness in her character. Contrary to what was expected, Charu refuses to be the quintessential 'angel in the house.' She not only acknowledges her desires and loneliness but even voices them to a society that hadn't heard such pleas from women.

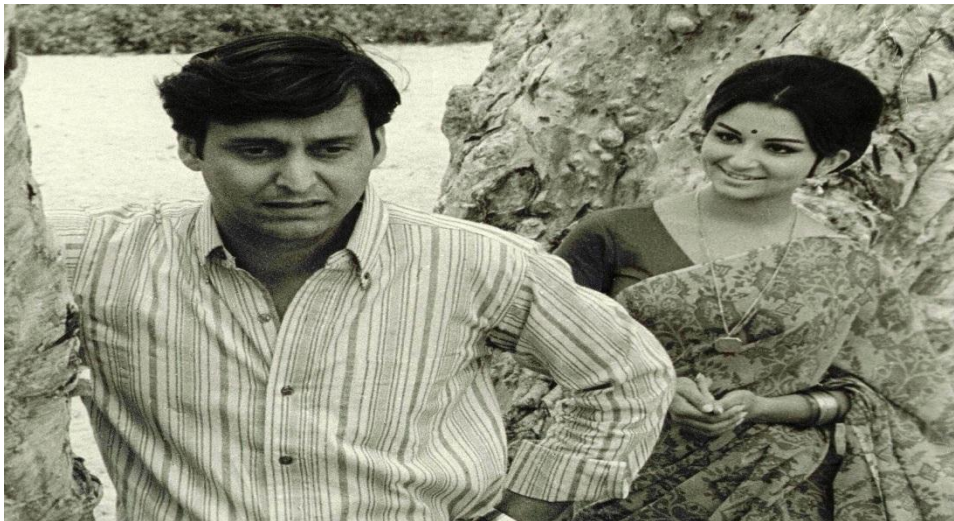
Arati in Mahanagar



Released in 1963, Mahanagar (The Big City) is a lesson in feminism. Posited at a time when the middle-class Bengali household was undergoing tremendous changes, the film witnesses the first unsure step taken by women as they sought to carve out their own identity in the world. Arati belongs to a traditional middle-class Bengali household, who transforms from a homemaker to a working wife, to shoulder the responsibility of her family after her husband loses his job. Ray, in the film, brilliantly captures the first sense of freedom enjoyed by Arati, her encounter with the city, and the change she allows herself to enjoy, without altering her intrinsic character.

Very few films have narrated tales of equality as finely and brilliantly as Mahanagar. As the husband and wife walk through the crowded streets of the city, Ray ushers in the new era of women empowerment, where women are self-sufficient, and walk hand-in-hand with their male counterparts, without a sense of competition.

Aparna in Aranyer Din Ratri



Based on a Bengali novel by Sunil Gangopadhyay, Aranyer Din Ratri traces the change a group of friends undergoes as they leave the city behind, and come in close contact with the forest and tribal realities.

Aparna is intelligent, poised, and enviously composed. She intrigues her male counterparts and baffles them. The film not only presented women in a way that was a departure from the norm, but it also gave us female characters who were comfortable with their sexuality and were not afraid to experiment.

Bimala in Ghare Baire



Adapted from Rabindranath Tagore's novel of the same name, the film explored the author's difficult relationship with the idea of nation, and the brand of nationalism that was endorsed before independence. But the film, keeping the essence intact, also brought in the desires of an illiterate housewife. Bimala, the wealthy wife of zamindar Nikhilesh, worships her husband as she was taught to do. But, once exposed to the world outside (baire), her devotion falters. She falls for the swadeshi leader Sandip, and in no uncertain ways, expresses her love for him.

In the film, Ray gives us a wonderfully real character, a timid housewife who understands herself better after encountering the world outside. And much like Mahanagar, her self-discovery is encouraged by her husband, as his wife ultimately returns to him, but as a wife, not a devotee.

Ray's films were not propagandist and didn't scream out their message. But he treated his female characters with a rare amount of generosity. It is this that makes him a master craftsman and his characters unforgettable.

Reference

<https://m.timesofindia.com/entertainment/bengali/movies/news/birth-centenary-tribute-how-satyajit-rays-women-protagonists-became-contemporary-to-men-not-equals/articleshow/82307500.cms>